

National Cultural Policy Submission

Northern Pictures

Submitted: On behalf of a for-profit arts business

What challenges and opportunities do you see in the pillar or pillars most relevant to you? Feel free to respond to any or all pillars:

First Nations

We support the submission by Screen Producers Australia.

The stories of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are central to our unique culture. The screen industry has an important role to play in bringing these stories of high cultural importance and value to audiences, both at home and abroad.

It is important that not only do we have the opportunity to see more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stories on our screens, but that our First Nations creative workers have the opportunity to tell their stories themselves, from their own voice, language and culture.

Within the consideration of telling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stories, it is also important to ensure that we see a diversity of these stories, both traditional and contemporary, both urban and remote – and everything in between. Indigenous Australians come from a range of different cultural nations, each with unique experiences, customs and languages and these should be recognised and preserved for future generations.

The social and cultural dividend and opportunities from telling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stories extends well beyond the that for the immediate producers, creatives, cast and crew involved but also reaches out to include the communities drawn into the production process, both directly as suppliers and indirectly through reinforcement of the importance of these stories to our culture.

To this end, Northern Pictures is the junior partner in production company Yoowarni Productions, a joint venture with Ice Cream Productions and its First Nations creatives, Benny Eggmolesse and Scott Wilson. Yoowarni is focused on the co-creation of content with an Indigenous perspective.

Valuing culture and bringing stories to a national audience sends a powerful message of place and inclusion. This is particularly important in the context of support and deeper engagement with the Uluru Statement of the Heart and implementing a Voice to Parliament. Screen culture can assist by creating stories giving that give voice; assist with truth-telling and empowering First Nations to take their rightful place in Australia's cultural heritage.

We believe it is important that our National Cultural Policy addresses the challenge of how to build on the successes to date of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander screen stories and ensure this continues into the future through increased support, strong institutions and funding opportunities.

A Place for Every Story

We support SPA's position that an investment regulation for 20% of major streaming platform Australian revenue be invested in newly commissioned Australian stories and that this should be an outcome for the new National Cultural Policy.

Our screen stories are an important part of Australia's culture and should be seen in every place these stories can be told. This content ranges across Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, children's, drama, documentary, games and light entertainment programs.

Unfortunately, audiences are seeing fewer and fewer Australian stories on our screens both in overall numbers for certain types of production and relative to the total amount of content available. It is important for a National Cultural Policy to examine government policy settings to remedy this decline.

All screen platforms are the right places for Australian stories: our cinemas, free-to-air, subscription and multi-channel broadcasters and increasingly, online on-demand platforms such as subscription video on demand (SVOD) and broadcasting video on demand (BVOD) services.

Regulation to require major streaming platforms like Netflix, Amazon, Paramount+, STAN and Disney+ to make a reasonable and fair contribution to investing some of their Australian revenue (earned from Australian subscribers) in Australian stories has been on the policy agenda for more than ten years and is long overdue for government action.

The Centrality of the Artist

Screen producers occupy a diverse and challenging role in bringing great Australian stories to our screens. Without our business skills, creative endeavour would more often flounder for lack of commercial and organisational acumen.

Screen producers take the burden of the risks and are responsible for driving a creative project forward.

We oversee the technical aspects of creating film and television content and run the process from start to finish – from identifying creative content, developing a project with writers, hiring the cast and director, financing, hiring crew, post-production and selling the final work.

It is therefore important for a National Cultural Policy to ensure that screen industry practitioners operate within an economic framework that enables them to create, participate and prosper within this important cultural sector. Without profitable screen businesses who are rewarded for successes, screen culture would lose its characteristics of diversity and dynamism.

Screen production deals should be underpinned by fair negotiation of commercial contracts to ensure our screen businesses and those they employ are all able to operate sustainably and are not disadvantaged by the business practices of more powerful global distributors.

We support SPA's position that in conjunction with any consideration of additional investment by streaming platforms or others, Australia should urgently implement a "terms of trade" framework in order to maintain the sustainability and viability of our screen industry and the independent producers at the heart of it.

Strong Institutions

The Australian screen industry needs strong, stable and well-funded institutions to provide leadership and industry intelligence to the sector, to direct support and funding where market failure exists and to facilitate healthy domestic and international investment in Australian screen stories.

Screen practitioners – from new entrants to those at every stage of their careers - rely on strong public institutions as well as a pipeline of private investment to support their careers and their businesses.

Well-funded public institutions help support a diversity of stories and creators by investing in innovative storytelling and providing pathways to new entrants to the industry. They also set the standard of business practices that are a model for the industry to adopt.

It has been some time since the role of cultural agencies like Screen Australia was reviewed by government and it is timely that this happens to ensure they remain relevant in supporting the needs of the industry in the rapidly changing media landscape.

We support SPA's call for a review of Screen Australia and other bodies that are primarily funded by the Federal Government to support the screen industry.

This review would be of significant benefit to the screen sector, boost confidence and provide an opportunity to re-set and re-calibrate to support the needs of the industry for the future.

We also support increased funding for Government funded institutions focused on teaching the story tellers and technicians on whom the future of the Australian screen industry will rely (e.g. AFTRS in Sydney) and for the national broadcasters (ABC and SBS) to better support them in their missions to champion Australian voices.

Reaching the Audience

Screen stories are the expression of Australian culture and offer some of the easiest and most accessible opportunities for Australians to participate in and contribute to our national character.

Australian audiences must be able to discover and locate Australian stories on all platforms, including on the increasingly dominant streaming services.

In the last 2 years, with the removal of the children's content quotas from commercial free-to-air television, children in Australia have experienced a sharp drop in their ability to see their own stories on the screens they are watching. The absence of any requirement for local content on streaming services has greatly contributed to this development.

Australian children 16 years and under make up 21% of the Australian population. In our view, their Australianness is particularly vulnerable to being swamped by other English language speaking television cultures. We believe urgent regulation is needed to ensure that Australian children see and hear themselves and their stories on our screens, to give them pride and confidence in their difference from, for example, children in the United States and the United Kingdom.

We are also concerned that the absence of children's stories in Australia will have a significant knock-on effect on international perceptions of the Australian character and culture. Historically, children's television has been among the most exportable television Northern Pictures has produced.

If local television platforms do not fund new Australian children's television, Australian children's television will not be available for later (second window) distribution either within Australia or internationally.

As Australian producers, it is of real concern to us that less local children's television will mean a diminished profile for Australia generally, which will necessarily mean less opportunities for us to sell screen stories that showcase our unique culture and character in the international market.

We support calls for improved regulation to ensure that both commercial free-to-air broadcasters and streaming platforms provide a reasonable and commensurate proportion of broadcast hours and titles of newly commissioned Australian children's screen stories.